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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: RUSSIA TO GEORGIA: SABER RATTLING STOPS SHORT OF  
CONFLICT

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Daniel Russell:  
Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: On May 8, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that measures by Georgia to deploy more forces in the zone of conflict could lead to an additional deployment of 500 Russian peacekeepers -- up to the 3000 limit in the 1994 Moscow Agreement. MFA Director Kelin told us there were "no immediate plans" to increase troop levels, reiterated concern over Georgian military movements, flagged claims of another two Georgian UAVs shot down, and questioned why Georgia's Foreign Minister had yet to travel to Moscow. The Europeans have reinforced our message of restraint: FM Lavrov told French FM Kouchner this was a Georgia-Abkhazia issue and pointed to Georgian military moves; First DFM Denisov reiterated to the EU that Russia did not seek a military conflict. Experts here remain convinced that Russia welcomes brinkmanship but not bloodshed, with the political elite focused on Russia's unfolding political succession. Next week's visit of FM Steinmeier and possible visit of FM Kouchner provide high-level windows to reinforce international concern over the escalating tensions. End Summary

#### Russian Military Deployments; Georgian Moves

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12. (C) On May 8, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that the number of its peacekeepers in Abkhazia, which had risen from 1997 to 2542, could increase to the full 3000 permitted under the 1994 Moscow Agreement in the event of a "further worsening of the situation" on the ground. Further steps by the Georgian security services to deploy more forces in the conflict zone would lead to "necessary and adequate" responses by the Russian side to bolster the peacekeepers' ranks. The Ministry of Defense statement noted that Russia "recently" had informed UNOMIG of the numbers, disposition, and tasks of the peacekeepers and cited Major General Khattak's assessment that the activities of the Russian forces did not contradict the basic agreements regulating the peacekeepers' presence. The Ministry of Defense rejected Georgian calls for the withdrawal of the additional peacekeeping forces and concluded that Russia would adhere to its obligations and not permit the situation in the region to destabilize. Press reports also quoted senior Russian military officials, who reinforced that the deployment was to prevent bloodletting in the Caucasus.

13. (C) In the wake of the May 8 announcement, MFA 4th CIS Director Andrey Kelin told us that the Defense Ministry statement simply reasserted the option that Russia retained under the 1994 Moscow Agreement to raise its peacekeeper levels by another 500 troops; as of yesterday, he maintained, the Ministry of Defense had "no immediate plans" to raise its force levels. Kelin also underscored that UNOMIG was fully apprised of the Russian peacekeeping presence, and rejected the need to coordinate in advance with the Georgian government. Stressing that Russian steps were designed to

defend Abkhazia from the Georgian use of military force, Kelin insisted that Tbilisi had embarked on a destabilizing military course. Citing intelligence, Kelin said that Georgia was introducing new capabilities along the Georgia-Abkhaz border and that he had just learned of the shooting down of another two Georgian UAVs. In a typical Kelin swipe, he noted similarities between the President's and Saakashvili's letter to Putin; while Putin had responded to Saakashvili, Kelin castigated Georgia for failing to send its Foreign Minister to Moscow, as agreed upon in January, "although he and his successor have visited every other foreign capital."

#### Europeans Call for Restraint

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¶4. (C) Our European colleagues have reinforced our message of restraint to the Russians, with the French Embassy reporting that Georgia-Abkhazia featured prominently in the May 7 call by Foreign Minister Kouchner to FM Lavrov. In response to Kouchner's message to show restraint and roll back provocative GOR measures towards Abkhazia, Lavrov argued that Georgia's fight was with Abkhazia, not Russia, and highlighted recent GOR efforts to improve the bilateral relationship. Lavrov apparently pointed to Georgia's military buildup, including reports that up to twenty tanks had been moved towards Abkhazia, and noted Putin had replied to Saakashvili on May 6 urging restraint. (Note: The Georgian Embassy was not aware of a recent communication between Putin and Saakashvili.) In a May 7 meeting with First Deputy Foreign Minister Denisov, the EU Mission also urged Russia to repeal the presidential instructions and roll-back its increase in peacekeepers. Denisov acknowledged

the seriousness of the situation, but reiterated that Russia was not seeking to precipitate conflict and sought a reduction in tensions. The Georgian Embassy reports that this is the message it has received as well, while expressing concern over the "larger issues" that are not in the MFA's purview.

#### Experts: Brinkmanship, not Bloodshed

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¶5. (C) In May 8 discussions with leading defense experts, the consensus view remained that Russia did not want a military conflict in Abkhazia. Aleksandr Golts, Deputy Editor-In-Chief of the Weekly Journal, said Russia did not want to invade Georgia, but was "playing on the nerves of the West." A military conflict would end Russia's efforts to engage in "Putin-style diplomacy" with Georgia, where brinkmanship, but not bloodshed, was the preferred tactic. Golts shared our concern that escalation was possible, but believed there was a minimal chance the situation would spin out of control. Aleksandr Belkin, Deputy Director for Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, argued that neither Russia nor Georgia wanted a military conflict, but were using the tensions for their own foreign policy agendas. While Russia would not be an instigator to a conflict, Belkin stressed that if Georgia miscalculated and attacked, Russia would respond -- maybe not with troops, but certainly with weapons and air support. Ivan Safranchuk, Director of the World Security Institute, added that Russian leaders were concerned Saakashvili could overreact and provoke a clash. He linked the Defense Ministry's comments on potentially increasing the peacekeepers to Russian fears that Georgia would start "a small firefight" as a warning. Safranchuk argued that the Defense Ministry statement sought to underscore the consequences of escalation.

#### Comment: Russia's Preoccupation is Domestic

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¶6. (C) The conflict over Abkhazia is currently a side-show to Russia's political succession. Yesterday's inauguration of Medvedev and today's ascension of Putin as Prime Minister have monopolized the political space, with both leaders focused on messages of domestic reform. Foreign policy was

not mentioned in Putin's hour-long address to the Duma, with Medvedev likewise focused on land reform and housing for veterans. To the extent that military maneuvers factor into the public consciousness, it is limited to the reemergence of military hardware in tomorrow's May 9 Victory Day celebrations in Red Square. The potential visits next week of both the German and French Foreign Ministers will refocus attention on foreign policy, and provide an opportunity to reinforce again with the Russian leadership the dangers of brinkmanship in the Caucasus.

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